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"HOW TO MEET A CRISIS"
S E R M O N
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HOW TO MEET A CRISIS

There are two ways of approaching the type of subject that we have chosen for today. One way--it is the easier and more satisfactory from a superficial standpoint--is to give a number of stories of famous people who have met crises and triumphed over them. A speaker can get a good deal of emotional response from his audience on that sort of an address, and yet, when the crisis comes to you, yourself, you wonder what you have learned from knowing the fact that someone else met a crisis of a different sort and triumphed over it. It always leaves you still wondering with, of course, however, the spur to success on your part because other people gained it in theirs.

The other way, the way that I have chosen this morning, is to think around the general field of the thought, the problem, pointing out the issues at stake, the various elements to be considered, the general methods of approach, things to look for and things to avoid and attitudes to nurture. But this method leaves you so very often, if not usually, with a blank frame, and people go out saying: "Well, that is all right for the minister to say, but what about me when it happens to me?" As I have heard so often lately, it is different when it happens to you.

There is no easy solution to a crisis. There is no simple formula that a person can grab and then have the success and the triumph over anything that will come to him. The best you can do is to get the general approach, and then when it happens to you, you will know what you must do; and it will be yours to work out in fear and trembling.

The time to prepare for a crisis is before it happens, but you are never entirely prepared. Even the best, as notice Jesus, when the crises come, have still a tremendous fight on their hands. It can be easier for you than it usually is, and it should be; and that is the religious importance of this discussion.

What is a crisis? "A crisis is a vitally important or decisive stage in the progress of anything. It is a turning point. It is a state of affairs in which an important and vital decision for better or for worse is imminent." This is a dictionary definition, but I want you to notice it very carefully. "It is a vitally important stage in the progress of anything." The general theory there is that is is a progressive thing that is being threatened in this critical situation, not a static thing, but something that is evolving, and there comes a point at which a decision must be made which will determine whether that thing is to go on in its progression, or is to go back.

For better or for worse. It applies to anything. It may apply to cultures. This happens only once in a century or more. It happened in the Fourth Century, again in the Eighteenth, perhaps one or two places in between, depending on the historians point of view. It may even be a crisis in the state of the progress of Mankind, but the most common are those that happen in the affairs of nations, critical points, after which that nation either goes forward or backward. Most common of all, of course are the crises that come to us as individuals. Where are you going to study? What sort of things are you going to study? That decision comes in the lives of most young people. It is, for instance, a problem to the young people of this church sitting in the gallery this morning. What do I want to work for in life? What is the end object? What is it that makes success? There comes a time when you have to choose between two jobs. There comes a time when you have to make a decision in your job, whether you will do it

one way or the other. There comes a time when you lose your job. There comes a time when there is a crisis in the affairs of a man and a woman. They see they have been drifting into a state of constant bickering and quarrelling, and a decision has to be made for better or for worse. There comes a time when the bread-winner in a family is stricken, and he will never again work, and the family faces a great crisis. There comes a time when someone you love dies, and that is happening with sickening rapidity and frequence in this day of awful war. All of these things are crises having a difference when they happen to you, but they are always the same thing; the same situation. The same issues are involved and the same principles apply.

Now, what is the nature of a crisis? First of all, a crisis disorganizes. It must. It is the very nature of a crisis. Where there is no disorganization, there is no conscious acceptance of a crisis. I may have vitiated my principle a little there, but I will clarify it later. There must be a tearing up of the routine experience. Something that is new must enter in, an experience that we have never had before, or at least never had in just this form. So our whole life is disrupted and torn loose as we contemplate the agony and the misery, the consequences of the thing that is upon us, as we look out in the blackness of a future apparently without light because the thing we valued most is gone, or is about to go, or has been threatened with decay. That is always true in a crisis.

Another important thing in a crisis is that there comes the opportunity of greater things unknown. This is the most important point in this sermon, right at the beginning. I am given to understand that the Chinese symbol for "crisis" has two characters. One of them means danger, and the other means opportunity. It must be wonderful to have a language as descriptive as that, because that is what a crisis is. It is a decisive and vitally important stage. On the one side of it is danger and on the other side is opportunity. It all depends on us, whether we turn it toward danger, or take that danger that is always there and make it an opportunity for greater knowledge, greater usefulness, greater beauty, a greater contribution. Now that is not just rhetorical talk. It is a true analysis.

I remember reading somewhere, sometime, from an anthropologist's pen, a story of the emergence of a little chick from the shell, and he said that of the creatures of the earth that come into being that way, only a small percentage actually come. The great majority are lost in the shell, and they never get out. Within that shell, there is the tissue of life for the growing chick; and some chicks eat that tissue and it gives them strength; but others neglect it, and the tissue which could have given strength strangles them. Then there comes another crisis at the time when the tissue in the shell is all gone and that chick must break its shell and emerge or perish. Many more perish at that point than those which, having the strength and the courage, and for the purposes of illustration only, the understanding, break their shell, and emerge into a life of new, tremendous experience. The entire story is here in this very simple, homely illustration. That which can nourish, can also destroy, and it all depends on us, whether we see the life giving values in those tissues, the tissues of experience, or whether we allow them to strangle us, and thus die by means of that which should be the entrance to longer, stronger life. But I am not going to push the illustration any further. I want you to take it home and work on it yourself.

Now what kind of crises are there? There are three major kinds. But first of all, I should say that there are, over and above that, two large types. We have already mentioned them, and this is for the purpose of clarification. There is, first of all, the crisis that comes to large masses of things. I mean

Mankind, or perhaps included in that, the Nation. And on the other side, the crises that come to individuals. Those two may each be divided into three other sections, three kinds.

First of all, there are the crises that we do not see. That is why I said a little earlier that I, perhaps, vitiated my principle in talking about the conscious awareness of the crisis, saying that it had to disorganize you. It ought to disorganize you. I will change it now into that, because some of the most important crises are those we never see.

Secondly, there are those crises, that we know are coming. I do not know which is more important, those we know are coming, or the third type, those that come unexpectedly. Probably, in this particular day, for you, as individuals, the second is the most important. You who have sons and daughters fighting this war know that if it isn't definitely coming, the death of some of these, there is a strong possibility. It is the kind of crisis that intelligent people prepare for. You know that taxes are coming due. You know that old age, if you live long enough, is coming on you. Women know that they are not going to be as beautiful, in the common sense of the word, as they grow older. I said common sense of the word, remember. You know that death is coming, coming to each one of us, and apparently more imminent for some than for others. We are given the advantage of knowing, and of being able to prepare. We are awfully foolish people if we do not take advantage of this knowledge.

And now the third type. It is suddenly there. Out of a bright, blue sky comes a thunder cloud, and you are drenched. That happens every day to some person in a congregation as large as this, and woe be it to them if they have not prepared themselves for it, even though they couldn't have foreseen it!

There are ways in which to meet these crises, and there are ways in which we should not meet them. I am going to name three or four ways first in which we should not meet a crisis. First of all, you should never fail to see it. Crises come in the affairs of a nation or in the progress of Mankind, or of a species. But few of us live long enough, perhaps, or are so imbued with wisdom as to be able to see them when they come. That is asking too much of us. Less so, of course, in a nation than in the affairs of Mankind at large. Some men can do it for a nation, but there is really no reason why an individual should let a crisis come in his career and not see it.

The most influential book in my early high school days was a book called "The Art of Thinking" by Abbe Dimnet, and in that book, the one thing I remember most from it--and I studied it and read it so carefully--was what he called "'tits details". That's French. I know I shouldn't have tried the pronunciation without asking someone, but it means, "little details". The author spoke of the incapacity of people to deal with the important things in their lives because they were so absorbed in trifling details. I have been observing the truth of that discussion in the years that have elapsed since I read it first.

Another man, a modern philosopher of religion, described it this way. He said you watch a modern man, and he billows with all the detailed knowledge that he has accumulated, and when there comes a time of crisis, and he has got to make a knockout blow, he weaves and rolls and billows, but he can't land the punch. We know everything about movie actors and actresses. We know everything about these military campaigns. We have all the facts on cars and refrigerators. We are beautiful at quiz programs. What a debilitating thing they are. Notice the number of people burdened with all their inconsequential knowledge and utterly helpless when face to face with the task of dealing with the really important

problems. If there were any value in all this knowledge of the trivial details of life the American people would be a great deal better than they are and a great deal more efficient in the handling of their own affairs and very much wiser in the directing the life of man through this perilous time.

Now, I don't know what those little things are in your life, but they are almost always the same. What you find true of other people, you probably find true of you. And so, Jesus, at one point, said to people who were asking him for a sign. Ah, you are very clever, you farmers and city folk. You look at a sunset, and you say it will be a good day tomorrow, or storm clouds come up and you say it will rain, but you do not know how to tell the sign of the times. You do not know when crises come in your personal lives because you are billowing around with too much small detail. Well, we had better not fail to see the sign of the times, or the sign of a crisis, but we will if we are too absorbed in little things or too optimistic. Now, traditionally, preachers, and the like, are supposed to give pep talks on optimism, but optimism can be a very dangerous and a soul-destroying trait. We will meet that a little later here. First of all, then, do not fail to see it.

Secondly, the wrong way to meet it is to be afraid. Fear destroys all the capacity for action. It debilitates the will. It weakens the nerve. It destroys the capacity to think. It tends to make impossible creative and positive action. Nevertheless, when a crisis comes, most of us dissolve in fear, and become trembling masses of matter. We can't organize to get going, and we lie there inert usually feeling sorry for ourselves, while things act upon us and we ought to be acting upon things. Fear is perhaps the worst way. It is the most common.

A third way not to meet it--this is a common way too--is to rely on the supernatural aid of God. Out of that trembling mass of fear and helplessness, there comes so often the cry: "I can't do anything; from now on it is in the hands of God." Now I believe that in some degree, and shall attempt to deal with it very briefly this morning, but much more thoroughly at a later date. Nevertheless, when you lie back and expect God to change the course of events for you, you have taken the wrong way to meet a crisis. I will put it this way. I don't think it works that way. I am sure, in my own mind, it does not, and I am confident I could prove that it does not.

The fourth wrong way is to have rigid habits. I said a minute ago one of these was perhaps most important. I will take that back. I don't know which is most important. I know if a person dissolves in fear, he is done. I know that if a person counts on God's picking him up and saving him, he is done--usually. I know that if you do not see a crisis, you are done, unless you are fortunate. And I know that when a crisis comes to people whose habits are rigid, they are done, because, you see, a crisis, by the very nature of our definition, ought to disorganize. It ought to tear you up by the roots and spread you open, and if you have become so grooved that nothing will break that pattern, you will die in the shell. You won't be able to get out. Those rigid habits that make your life so efficient, which we modern Americans have been trained to build up, one on top of the other and to idolatrize as being almost divine, that very virtue that brings success so often will destroy us in a crisis when something deeper is needed and the soil is too hard for it to spring up. There must be ploughing up of the spirit as well as of the soil in the springtime.

There are, of course, parallel to these, three or four ways in which a crisis should be met, and these points come from a greater thinker than I. The things that I preach to you are never just the things that I discover. They are the fruits of centuries of search. You take these four ways home with you and really begin to think about them, because if there is one all supreme thing in

my faith, even stronger than my belief in God though perhaps dependent mind which will bring you above the things that happen to you by going through them triumphantly, you can get it; "Knock and it shall be opened unto you. Seek and ye shall find." The trouble is that we do not seek.

First of all then in the ways to approach a crisis is the need to be alert. Be alert so that the crisis doesn't come and slip by before you have noticed it. Be alert so that you can act upon events and at the same time be acted upon, because I do think that is equally as important. But you have to know what it is that is acting upon you and you have to be able to sift those things so that you will let the right kind of thing act on you. In order to do that, you have got to be very alert, and the way to be alert is to pray. How do you expect to be able to do these things if you do not train for them? How do you expect to be able to answer questions on quiz programs if you do not read the newspapers, and popular magazines and if you do not study and prepare for them. Well, that is the only parallel between meeting a crisis successfully and answering a quiz. You will not be able to do either if you have not prepared. In the case of a crisis that means spending some time in meditation, in meditation and reflective thought, I am using those words with discretion, meditation and reflective thought upon the trends and ties in your life; upon that thing upon which your life should be built; upon the most important reality. There isn't one in--I was going to say fifty--there isn't one in a hundred of this group of a thousand or more here who does that, and there are only sixty per cent of the people in the Country who go to church. There is a great and crying need for all of us to learn how to be alert.

In the second place, you have got to be fearless. It is easy to say you must be fearless, but I shall break it down into two simple constituents. Remember, of course, that you will be afraid when you get torn up by something that hits you as an apparent disaster. It is interesting and worthwhile to note that almost every war hero confesses he was afraid in spite of his apparent courage. You will be afraid when a crisis comes too, but there are ways of overcoming that fear, and the most important of them is: Face the facts. Face the facts, This was one of those marks of "Mature Religion" that we talked about some weeks ago. This whole sermon is really built around one or two of those points. Face the facts.

The blancly optimistic people do not always face the facts. Oh, they say, you don't have to worry. It will never happen to John. John has always looked after himself. He has always been capable. It can't happen to a boy as good as he. And so they go on building up in their minds an immunity. God wouldn't let it happen because they pray, and because they put his name on a piece of paper and handed it into a church and the priest there prayed. It can't happen. But then, suddently, it does happen and you are completely unprepared.

When it does happen to you, a death or any other crisis, what is the procedure? There is one unavoidable necessity: Bring out the facts in all their strength, because these are now the conditions under which future life must be lived. This is the situation that we have got to face and solve, and you cannot solve a situation unless you know what is involved. The first way to overcome fear is to face it. Most fear comes from hiding one's head in the sand, being afraid to look at it. When you lay open the situation you have taken the first step on the way. The second step is to accept defeat. This is another point contrary to the general trend of so-called inspirational speech that one should never accept defeat. In spite of this it is still true that one of the important things to learn is how to accept defeat. I don't mean defeat of your life, I mean the defeat of any one thing, or any group of things that are precious to you, but when you see that it is done, face the fact and accept it because that is the condition upon which your future life will be built.

When the tissue is all eaten in the shell, you either die there or break the shell. The point of all this is that that defeat which is apparent disaster and danger on its reverse side, is the greatest opportunity you have ever had. And the more disastrous that defeat appears to be the more wonderful is the opportunity staring you in the face if you will only lift your eyes to see it.

Be fearless and be alert. Have confidence in yourself and in God. God won't do it for you, but, you, with God, can do it. You will face the facts and be alert and accept defeat when and if you get faith in God. You will be doing things because of your faith, because you know that this one thing which seemed most important, isn't most important. God is most important, and so we shall learn to say with that wonderful character in "The Fountainhead": "I could die for you, but I can't live for you." We must not live for anyone or for any thing apart from God. When you live for God, you live for the best that you know in anything and everyone. But when you start by living for someone, you are done, because you have interposed between you and God an idol, and you never get down to God. So many of us--most of us--go on living in fear because we do not have the proper foundation. When you have that you are unafraid, and thatis the only way in which you can be unafraid. Don't you think we need that in this day of chaos?

The fourth way to meet a crisis is to be plastic. Be alert; be unafraid; have faith in God and yourself; and be plastic. Be ready to change. Never have any habits so ingrained that you cannot break them, Never have any scheme of life so arranged that you cannot break it. Never have any one person so important to you that you can not get along without him. Be plastic. Be ready to take that disorganization that comes and will come as sure as death to any of us, to take that disorganization and to use it--that ploughed up ground--for new life, new heights, new glories; and the more severe the ploughing up, the more wonderful the product that can be grown. That is straight, hard thinking.

One man, a non-religious writer, has said this about a crisis. He called it that "benign moment of disintegration." Listen to that. "That benign moment of disintegration, when all the old is broken and gone, and now you can start anew to build a better world."

Another writer expresses the same idea when he describes a crisis as "The call of God to help Him in the building of a better world." And that is what it is. That is why Paul said: "I glory in my infirmities. I welcome every defeat because in and through those infirmities and that defeat, I purge myself. I become new. When I amweakest, then I am strongest because then I am no longer tied to all these little details and all these things that I have exalted as being important and supreme. I am not tied to them any longer. Now I have nothing to live for but God. All the debris has been swept away and I am free to come to closer grips with Him, to see Him more clearly, and to understand Him more perfectly. You should know that no matter what it is that has been destroyed, you have got to make the best of what is left, and you should know that the best you make of what is left can, in every case, be a greater good than you knew before because now you are serving in a deeper and more understanding way the God Who made that good you knew before; and now you are more sensitive and more aware and more deeply religious.